

PUSHING THE MERCHANDISE

Chevy dealer Dale Earnhardt gets a feel for being behind the wheel of the division's newest demo — the 210-horse Lumina Z34

By Kevin A. Wilson and Bob Myers

Dale Earnhardt has got one wry sense of humor.

"This front- or rear-drive?" he asked while being photographed behind the wheel of the appropriately black Lumina Z34 he was sampling at Charlotte Motor Speedway.

"Front," we replied reflexively, before noticing the glimmer in his eye.

Ooops. Trick question.

Earnhardt—we knew already—had tested a Lumina with the 210 hp, 24-valve twin-cam V6 before. That was at Daytona, where he'd introduced the car model to his fellow Chevy dealers. And he knows damned well which axle the new motor drives.

It was a test, see. The real question was: "Is this one of those effete Northern writers who thinks anyone who drives a stock car must be dumb as red dirt?"

It was a test we nearly flunked, but only inadvertently. You've got to pay close attention around Dale Earnhardt. He's got four NASCAR Winston Cup championships, career winnings of more than \$13 million, a lingering reputation as "The Intimidator" (though most stock car racing observers say he's mellowing), and one wry sense of humor.

So we did what we could toward a swift recovery, and looked into Earnhardt's eyes. With The Intimidator laughing back at us, we said, again, "Yeah. Front-drive. She's gonna push." He read it perfectly as: "Is this one of those drivers who thinks all magazine editors are gullible idiots?"

The laughter in his eyes moved south and became a chuckle.

Good. We understood each other.

These were the rules: NASCAR's hottest property—the man who that very week collected the Richard Petty Trophy, awarded to its "driver of the year" by the National Motorsports Press Association—would give us whatever amount of time he felt like giv-

ing us. We would not beg for more.

Then he would fly off to Alabama for deer hunting with buddy Neil Bonnett. The ex-NASCAR driver, that day's *Charlotte Observer* reported, will soon host a TNN television show revealing a side of his friend, Dale, rarely seen by the public. In other words, the real Dale was Alabama-bound.

Still, he was going to be at the speedway in the morning anyway, to renew his racing license. So he might as well take a little time to do press duty for his sponsors, pose for photos, drive around in the Z34 (his first encounter with the five-speed). And do his darndest to sell this car.

Heck, what'd you expect? Earnhardt drives a Goodwrench-sponsored Lumina and owns a Chevy dealership. You thought maybe he'd say something real critical about the car? Maybe talk trash about the too-small instruments in a dashboard of antiquated design, point out its two, too-long, too-heavy doors, or the lack of lateral support in the seat? Think again.

When he climbs into the car and takes us for a ride, Earnhardt might just as well be leaving the driveway of his Chevrolet store in Newton, N.C., taking a hot prospect for a spin, eager to close the deal and start talking trade-ins, financing, rustproofing and extended warranties.

Perhaps recalling the script from his dealer gig in Florida, he lauds the Z34 as "America's all-around performance car for the money in 1991."

Yes, he really said that. We got it on tape: "America's all-around performance car for the money in 1991."

D'you know anybody—anybody *at all*—who talks like that without someone writing the words down first?

O.K., so maybe he was just warming up.

"I'm excited about the car," says Earnhardt. Now that's believable. You and we and he know that 210 hp can't thrill a guy

used to three times that. But Dale the dealer must be excited to have Luminas that offer some old-fashioned horsepower.

It had to be hard, being a Chevy dealer while driving a Lumina-bodied race car to nine victories in 1990. Win on Sunday and the hottest Lumina at your Chevy store to sell on Monday—the fat-tired and be-winged "Euro"—had a wimpy 140 hp. And you couldn't even get one with a manual gearbox. The Z34 cures that embarrassing situation. It could be sold to a guy who's trading, say, a Monte Carlo. It does better than get out of its own way, hitting 60 mph in just over 7.0 seconds. That's a good-enough answer for Ford's SHO Taurus and Dodge's Spirit R/T.

"Chevrolet needed a performance car in the mid-price range and this is it," Earnhardt understates. "It's somewhat of a family car, seating five comfortably, with performance. It is a great car for young singles and families getting started and for older people who want something sporty."

After the initial sales pitch, Earnhardt the driver emerges for awhile. He avoids mentioning the fwd car's proclivity for power understeer, or the torque steer (which we find well-subdued, except when accelerating out of tight turns) but the other seat-of-Dale's-pants observations are much like ones we'd make ourselves.

He drives into a moderately wide left turn on the infield road course at 55 mph, negotiates it easily, accelerates off the corner, zig-zags as if scuffing stickered tires after a pit stop, then stops abruptly.

"See how good the car feels in the corner?" he asks. "It's built with a good handling package. It comes with low-profile, wide Goodyear Eagles and corners very well. It doesn't just go down and lay around like a regular road car. It doesn't slide, give or push and doesn't have a front-end or a back-end characteristic."



Don Grassman photos

Although more than a bit familiar with the combination of a black Lumina coupe and Charlotte Motor Speedway, Dale Earnhardt can't pass up the opportunity to try the Z34 on the track



SPECIFICATIONS

Base Price:	(est.) \$20,000
Wheelbase, (in):	107.5
Length/width (in):	199.3/71.7
Curb weight (lb):	3374
Powertrain:	Front transverse-mounted, 24-valve, injected, 3.4-liter/207 cid V6, iron block, alloy heads, 210 hp @5200 rpm, 215 lb ft @4000 rpm, front-drive, five-speed manual
0-60 (sec):	7.2
Top speed (mph):	130 (est.)
Suspension:	Ind. front MacPherson struts, coil springs, antiroll bar; ind. rear strut, transverse leaf spring, antiroll bar
Brakes:	Power assist, discs front and rear
Tires:	225/60R 16
Mpg/range:	27 mpg (EPA est.) × 16.5 gal = 445 miles

“That’s what’s real good about the car. (Coming out of the hole) it has great pickup. It pulls out and gets into traffic easily and when it gets to the next red light, it stops. The brakes, a disc package, are tremendous. It not only stops easily, it brakes in the turn and doesn’t upset the car.”

Earnhardt, wearing his driver’s uniform and a soft Goodwrench cap for photo purposes, suddenly cowers down to the sound of screeching tires, the result of a dumped clutch. It’s the only time the machine whimpers except when he misses a gear.

“Naw,” he says, flashing his familiar mischievous grin and acting surprised, “we didn’t scratch off. We just got off to a quick start. That’s performance!”

“The car is not going to be overrated as the maximum performance car, a Corvette, but it’s a whole-package passenger car. It’s going to surprise a lot of people for what it can and will do, particularly with the five-



speed, which I prefer, although I’ve driven the automatic.”

He’ll no doubt like knowing, as a dealer, that the automatic offers him a competitive advantage over the SHO Taurus, which still does not offer a shiftless option.

Unlike some of the other Lumina controls, the shifter for the Getrag five-speed feels pretty good. As long as you don’t try to rush the shifts. The tach is so small we suspect most drivers will end up shifting by ear and feel rather than trying to squeeze out the last iota of oomph anyway. That’s not an entirely bad deal, for unlike most twin-cam engines, GM’s isn’t tuned for

high rpm output so much as for full bottom-end torque—it runs out of wind before it winds up to the redline.

“The Z34 might run with the Corvette for a short time, but then the Corvette’s going to take command,” Earnhardt says. “Comparatively, though, dollar-for-dollar, this car is a great buy.”

He maybe knows something we don’t—Chevrolet says it hasn’t yet set a firm price, though most guesses hover in the \$20,000 range, just under the cost of SHO Taurus.

Going it alone on the dual-cam route

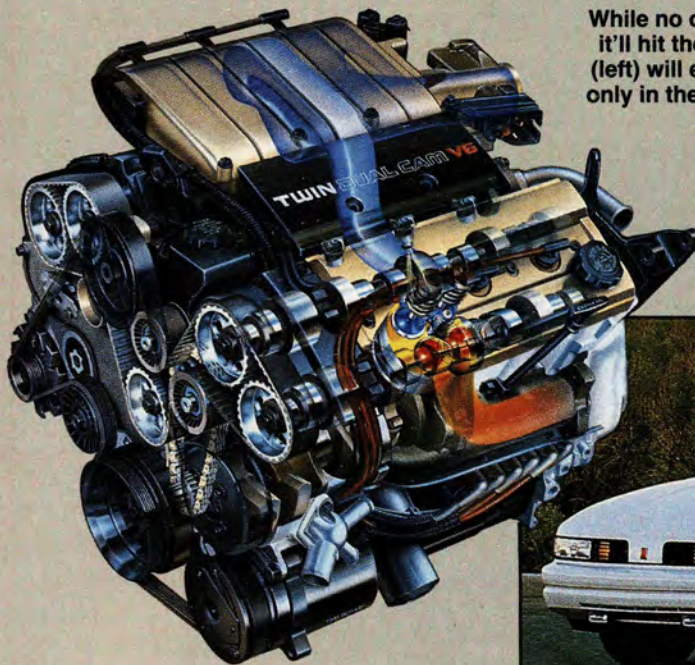
GM plunges ahead where others are slow to tread

When Ford wanted a four-valve-per-cylinder engine for its Taurus, it found the answer at Yamaha, which builds the 24-valve SHO engine. When Chrysler wanted a four-valve head for its four-cylinder turbocharged Spirit R/T, the answer came from Lotus.

But General Motors is going it alone to respond to those two domestic enthusiast sedans. The 24-valve GM10 cars—Lumina, Grand Prix and Cutlass Supreme (Buick opted for a 3.8-liter in the Regal)—use an all-domestic engine, an evolution of a familiar CPC powertrain.

Ford will eventually make a 24-valve six related to its 4.6-liter “modular” V8 and Chrysler has a twin-cam variant of its domestic V6 in the works, but GM is trying to be the first with the most.

“Trying” is the operative word, though. Initially slated for November deliveries, GM’s new twin-cam 3.4-liter 24-valve V6 is delayed in coming to market. An engineering problem, reportedly a dif-



While no one knows precisely when it’ll hit the market, 24-valve 3.4-liter (left) will eventually find a home not only in the Z34 but also GM10s from two other divisions: the Pontiac Grand Prix GTP (right) and the Oldsmobile Cutlass Supreme (below)

ficulty with oil sealing, is behind the delay, postponing not only the Lumina Z34 but also similarly powered GM10-based models at Pontiac and Oldsmobile.

Chevrolet now says it expects to bring Z34s to market sometime next month, but has yet to establish a price or a firm deli-



very date. Similarly, Pontiac dealers are still waiting to see their first Grand Prix GTPs, the 3.4-liter twin-cam model that replaces the Grand Prix Turbo in the lineup. Oldsmobile didn’t have a specific



The four-time Winston Cup champion gets his first shot at the five-speed version of the Z34 at Charlotte. He'd driven the automatic earlier at Daytona, where he helped introduce the car to fellow Chevy dealers



Strictly for photo purposes, before the road-course test, Earnhardt takes the Z34 onto part of the oval. We're not supposed to do that: on this cold day in late January, it is reserved by Miller Brewing Co. for com-

These guys really race on Sunday, sell on Monday

List of drivers 'moonlighting' as auto dealers is growing

More than 25 years ago, a racing driver named Roger Penske slipped out from behind the wheel, sat down behind a desk and went into business as a Chevy dealer. And our idea about what drivers do after racing has never been quite the same.

But today's racers don't abandon their driving careers to pursue business interests—they do both. And an obvious connection between careers is the one Penske made, between racing cars and selling them. So much so that the stereotype of the car dealer in a loud plaid suit may have to change to reflect the number of dealers in Nomex coveralls.

NASCAR drivers seem to own more car dealerships than do CART drivers. And Honda is their dealership of choice—perhaps because the Accord is the nation's best-selling car and the franchise is often mentioned by other dealers as desirable. A



Cale now peddles Hondas

Honda spokesman said the automaker doesn't offer racers special treatment.

Among NASCAR drivers who own dealerships are: Darrell Waltrip, who owns Darrell Waltrip Honda in Franklin, Tenn.; Dale Earnhardt, who owns Dale Earnhardt Chevrolet in Newton, N.C.; Neil Bonnett, who owns Neil Bonnett Honda in Hueytown, Ala.; Bill Elliott, who has a minority stake in Bill Elliott Ford in Dahlonega, Ga.; and Rusty Wallace, who owns a Pontiac-Cadillac-GMC-Mazda dealership in Morristown, Tenn.

Ex-stock car driver Cale Yarborough has Honda and Mazda stores in Florence, S.C., and Buddy Baker has a van conversion shop in Columbia, S.C.

CART drivers who also deal include A.J. Foyt, who owns A.J. Foyt Honda in Houston. Foyt also once owned a Chevrolet dealership in Texas' largest city. Bobby Rahal owns Bobby Rahal Honda in Mechanicsburg, Pa., and a Lexus dealership in Dayton, Ohio.

Some drivers—like Kyle Petty—have owned dealerships and sold them. Emerson Fittipaldi formerly sold Mercedes-Benz trucks in Brazil, among his other business interests. — Chuck Thomas



"Twin Dual Cam" by the CPC division marketing wizards.

GM boasts that the engine has the world's largest displacement among "multi-valve" V6s, and, so far, we've not seen one larger. This is indicative of the premium GM put on strong torque deli-

vers and the heads are separate units, divided at the (hydraulic) valve lifters. The cam carrier is tunnel-bored to house the two camshafts, which run directly in the bearing webs: no split bearing inserts, no end caps to worry about.

Like other dohc engines, GM's will spin to relatively high revs. But although it's redlined at 7000 rpm the engine seems to run out of breath well before that level, perhaps because the intake runners have been tuned to delivery maximum throttle-response and torque at low rpm. This is one 24-valve V6 that feels more like a V8 than a racing engine.

This effect is more noticeable when the engine is mated to the new four-speed electronically controlled automatic transmission. The 3.4-liter is rated at 200 hp at 5000 rpm with automatic, but 210 hp at 5200 rpm with the five-speed. Torque is rated at 215 lb ft with either transmission, and the peak is delivered at an identical 4000 rpm.

The manual transaxle is bolstered for use with this engine, using heavy duty synchronizers and a different clutch. For the Z34 model, Chevy adds big, 16-inch wheels, a "sport suspension" package with stiffer springs and antiroll bars, and a whole host of appearance tweaks, ranging from a tail spoiler to a louvered hood. ■

model built around the dohc engine, but planned to offer it as an option in all Cutlass Supremes with the exception of the convertible. When it's available, Pontiac, too, expects to offer it as an optional engine in nearly all Grand Prixes.

Distantly related to the 3.1-liter pushrod V6 and its 2.8-liter predecessor (it has the same bore centers, so it can be built with the same machinery, but the block casting is different), the 60-degree, even-firing V6 was dubbed the

very, even while moving the cam into the head to allow higher rpm.

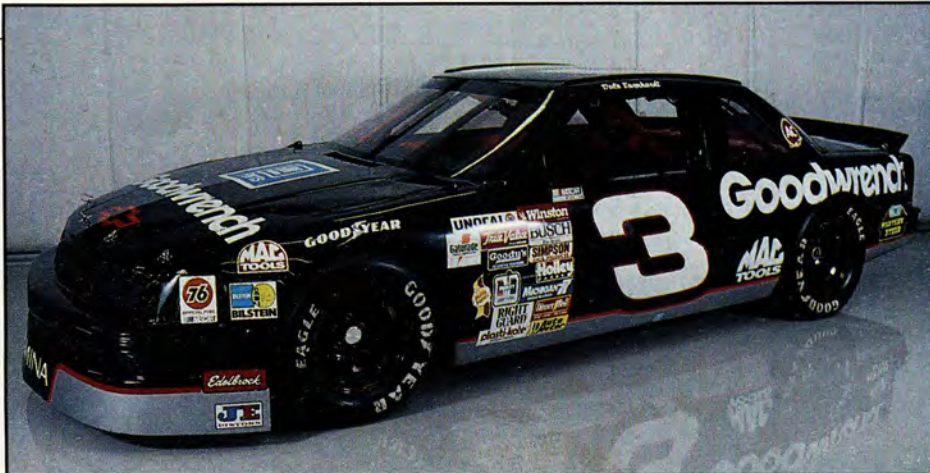
A chain driven by the crankshaft turns an intermediate shaft situated where the 3.4-liter engine's pushrod cousins house their camshafts: in the valley between cylinder banks. The oil pump is driven off the back side of this shaft, while the front end is used to drive a single, cogged belt that turns all four camshafts. There's also a single, serpentine belt-drive for the accessories housed in the one-piece aluminum front cover, with all accessory items (alternator, power steering pump, etc.) bolted directly to the cover.

Similarly unusual is that the cam car-

mercial photography involving both Danny Sullivan's Alfa Romeo Indycar and the new Roger Penske/Rusty Wallace Winston Cup team. A guard on the backstretch hails Earnhardt, but mistakes him for Wallace.

"Hey, we can do what we want to out here; this guy thinks I'm Rusty," says Earnhardt. Restraining the racer in him with reduced speed to accommodate the photo car alongside the Z34, he laughs at the thought of the case of mistaken identity. The photo car holds him outside until he swerves left, "suggesting" we take the pit lane rather than confront the Miller folks on the front straight.

"That's response and control," he says, and laughs. There is but one comparison Earnhardt can make with the Z34 and his No. 3 black Lumina racer. "The race car is so much stronger, firmer, rigid and noisier than the Z34," says Earnhardt, "but there is a parallel with the aerodynamics, which were developed and designed through racing. That helps in performance and gas mileage on the interstates at 60-70 mph. The car is striking in appearance and the lines are as slick and smooth as a baby's bottom."



Earnhardt usually earns his living pushing this black Lumina around a stock car track

We'd be worried if our baby's bottom sprouted as many wings, ground-effect panels and vents as the Z34 has when compared with our Lumina Euro photo car, but the point is made: Earnhardt sees the Z34 as both a racer and a dealer.

"From my standpoint as a racer, the performance and feel of this car are great," he says. "As a dealer, I say, 'Hey, this thing's got some performance—pep, pickup and a great braking package—and the room, com-

forts, qualities and appeal of a family car at a reasonable price. I think it has a niche in the market and will be a good seller.' "

That honest appraisal delivered, he's gone. Next time we'll see him will be at Daytona, where he'll try yet again to collect a Daytona 500 victory, the one major prize that has thus far eluded him. If he manages to push his Chevy across the line first, it could make pushin' Chevies on Monday morning a whole lot easier. ■

An old idea whose time may have come again

Show car hints Monte Carlo just might be resurrected

Although it appeared at the North American International Auto Show as a concept car, the Chevrolet Monte Carlo may, in reality, be Dale Earnhardt's next race car.

The show car that was seen in Detroit reportedly offers more than a mere hint of what the Lumina coupe may look like when it's reskinned for the 1993 model year. What enthusiasts will want to know is whether the show car also offers more than a hint of what might lie beneath the hood when Chevrolet revives one of its more famous nameplates.

Although the show car was built around what is essentially a Lumina, what Chevrolet concept builders actually did was use the the Lumina's GM10 platform only from the A pillars back. To the front, they attached the forward section from a C-body platform (on which the Cadillac DeVille and Fleetwood are built).

The purpose of such surgery was to make the Monte Carlo capable of carrying not only the Lumina's V6, but to make sure there was enough space to allow the option of fitting a V8.

It seems evident that Chevrolet is eager to bring the Monte Carlo back into production. In addition to the show car, pre-production bodies-in-white sporting a similar shape have been spotted at a General



Jim Frenak photo

Monte Carlo concept car seen in Detroit may be on track for production—and racing

Motors assembly plant.

The GM10 cars were introduced as 1988 models and are to be face-lifted before the mid-point of the current decade. Like the Lumina, the Pontiac Grand Prix gets a new look for the '93 model year, with the Buick Regal and Oldsmobile Cutlass Supreme taking on their new appearance a year later.

Chevrolet general manager Jim Perkins admitted that the Monte Carlo was displayed at Detroit (it also will be shown at Chicago), as a way of "testing public reaction" to both the vehicle and the resurrection of the Monte Carlo name.

"The notion of 'personal luxury' is what we're trying to convey with this concept car," Perkins said.

And if its shape helps people such as Earnhardt find the winner's circle at Daytona and other tracks around the coun-

try, so much the better.

The show car is equipped with much that would be wasted at the track: variable-effort steering, an electronic muffler system, ABS, 18-inch wheels, dual tailpipes, a Corvette-style clamshell hood, keyless entry system, and a windshield and backlight made of material which reflects ultraviolet sunlight.

Like the Lumina Z34, the Monte Carlo comes with the Twin Dual Cam 3.4-liter V6, in this case the 200 hp version. The concept car's interior features leather upholstery with cloth accents and bucket seats with six-way power, CD, wrap-around console, anti-theft system and four-place sound and climate controls.

Also part of the package, though less likely to reach production, are accelerator and brake pedals which adjust to fit drivers of various sizes. ■